

Unromancing The Stone of “Resistance” In Defence of A Continued Radical Politics In Visual Cultural Studies

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Abstract

The question of resistance as a pleasurable activity continues to be a theme within cultural studies. This essay argues that the ideology of pleasurable resistance is precisely the way that capitalist patriarchy maintains its hegemony through seduction. By focusing mainly on the writings of John Fiske and his employment of Foucault’s power/knowledge couplet and Barthe’s appropriation of *jouissance*, it is argued that the discursive subject position overlooks the value of the psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy identification. It is suggested that a more radical understanding of *jouissance* as developed within a psychoanalytic view of the split-subject needs to be addressed (or reinstated) into visual cultural studies research in order to take the seductive workings of fantasy into account. The essay ends with a call for a return to neo-Gramscian counter-hegemony through “popular visual education.” The difference between cultural studies and “visual” cultural studies is one of emphasis only. Throughout the essay the visual has been absorbed by the larger general category.

Like the alchemist's philosopher's stone, which was a substance that supposedly changed other metals into gold or silver, and like the fabulous diamond in the film *Romancing the Stone* which was to fulfill every possible fantasy, cultural studies has found its stone in the pleasures of "resistance." In the consumerist markets of transnational capitalism the resisting subject clears the space of agency in what would otherwise be a Baudrillarian sutured "ecstasy of communication" whereby all possible meanings have already been precluded, including the message and the receiver. While the question of "resistance" has been a laudable goal in visual cultural studies, I wish to interrogate this concept, perhaps adding a little tarnish to the stone's brilliance. My primary argument is that this concept, as it is currently deployed in postmodernism, is *over-romanticized* in its suppositions (cf. Curran, 1990; Schlesinger, 1991; McGuigan, 1992).

The "popularity" of resistance emerged during a time of neo-conservatism of the mid-'80s when the transformations of the New Right—Reagan/Bush in the US., Mulroney in Canada, Thatcherism in Britain, Helmut Kohl in Germany—required a response by a Left which had lost its authorial agency. One response to this crisis of the Left was provided by the neo-Gramscian proposal for a radical democracy as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). The "new social movements" at that time (feminism, green politics, animal rights, identity politics) were to be politically "articulated" by way of a discursive organization in a chain of equivalences between different forms of oppressions and struggles to form a counter-hegemonic force that was to oppose the current power bloc. Such a horizon of opportunity presented itself at a time when these social movements already had "antagonistic" relationships with the state; its members required no "conscientization" (cf. Paulo Freire) to make them aware of the inequalities of power and oppression. The decade that followed the publication of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony & Social Change*, however, saw the New Right make

continual gains in dispersing and recuperating these movements under the need for greater self-autonomy and less state control. A “culture of narcissism,” as Christopher Lash in 1978 argued, had fully emerged. The “war of position” had been lost, along with a troubling confirmation that class, race and gender as markers of stable identity, were no longer entirely adequate to theorize this change.

What arose simultaneously was the eventual supplantation of neo-Gramscian hegemonic struggles of “the people” with a social imaginary filled by Foucault’s power/knowledge couplet and de Certeau’s tactic/strategy games where “resistance” in both cases was coded as “good” because it was against the dominant ideology. The Left was characterized as avoiding the practicalities of everyday life, too concerned with the macro structures of society and expecting major social transformations which never came. These new social explanatory forms, supplemented by reception theories and ethnographic studies, which were more fluid in their applicability to capture the “morphing” conditions, seemed to answer the call of agency. However, the stress placed on the “pleasure” of resistance, as developed by one strand of cultural studies, has been particularly confusing in the wake of these post-Gramscian developments. It almost appears as if the pendulum has swung the other way. I refer to the difficulty of identifying resistances and struggles that are merely complicit with the power bloc from those that are antagonistic to it. With the concept of “false consciousness” as an illusory representation of reality having lost ground amongst post-Marxist circles, and with the theorization of Althusser making ideology fundamental to the human condition, the question of social progress remains “undecidable” unless a fuller democratic potential can be realized and “false consciousness” re-coded as still a useful concept. The valorization of “resistance” in cultural studies, with its subsequent flattening out of its qualities and forms, has overlooked the education of subjects opposed to the manifold and varied forms of power, which

was part of the Gramscian *moral* tradition of cultural studies in the first place. This has been replaced with a naive belief that consumers are more clever than was once thought. The stress on “resistant pleasures” has brought with it a tiresome and banal corollary: “the masses are not to be taken as cultural dopes” (cf. Morris, 1988). This essay explores the suspicion that this is precisely the subject-ideal that contemporary capitalism desires: subversive and de-stabilized identities who seek new modes of enjoyment through forms of romanticized resistances made possible by the “deterritorializations” of capitalism as exemplified by liberalist pluralist subject positions.

More specifically, the thesis entertained here is that the ideal subject of capitalist consumption is the exact *inverse* of the ideal subject of “real” socialism. In the socialist system, according to Havel (1985) and Salecl (1994: 48), the private citizen did not believe in the system; the regime was criticized privately but obeyed publicly. Capitalism is a system which is resisted publicly through democratic social actions, but obeyed privately in the belief this is the best that is possible. Socialist ideology functioned as long as the public rituals were obeyed. Capitalist patriarchal ideology maintains itself by constructing a symbolic space, which creates formations of fantasy whereby spectators are allowed to escape the traumas of everyday reality through forms of romanticized resistance. Capitalism’s staging of “the fantasy of resistance” through commodity culture provides the satisfaction that the subject’s own ideal ego has been achieved by exercising agency and free choice. The argument to be developed here is that many of the examples that are said to offer popular resistances of pleasure. Shopping, music and computer videos, fashion, game and quiz shows, soap operas, the science fiction genre and reality television are the *constitutive forms* of capitalist ideology, while “resistance” is the very *surplus* that comes with consuming enjoyment. “Resistance” to these forms is the very “symptom” of contemporary capitalism. Following Zizek (1989: 21),

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I want to suggest that this consumer “enjoyment” (*jouissance*) which makes the participation in these forms possible, already includes the “tactics” of resistant self-reflexivity. It *adds* to their enjoyment, which is what I mean by romantic resistance being a “surplus.” In other words, the ideological “being” of the ideal capitalist subject is offered a fantasy structure whereby *resistance* is symptomatic of the very logic of late capitalism. How else to account for the apparently obvious premise that the most successful popular cultural forms are the ones that are most financially successful because they reach such wide and diverse audiences? Hegemony operates precisely through popularity that is enhanced by the polysemic nature of a text (Lewis, 1991). Both complicity and contradiction are “factored” into the “bloc buster” texts (films, music and computer videos, books) including the academic market as well. As Ronald Jones sarcastically remarked, “Spending time devising the next confrontational culture is how the culture industry organizes the time of the intelligentsia” (in Hewison, 1990: 9).

In the preface to their second edition of *Escape Attempts* (1992/1976), Cohen and Taylor confirm the cynicism of “resistant” postmodernism: “twenty years ago we were fascinated by the ingenious and desperate ways in which people tried to ignore, subvert or resist paramount [dominant] reality. Now, we would have to start with the ways in which paramount reality ignores, subverts and *resists* itself all the time. At the same time there has been a spreading out, a popularization. The tricks, routes and programmes of the elite have become better known (if not actually available) to all ...” (16-17, my emphasis). Films like Robert Altman’s *The Player* or Roland Emmerich’s *Independence Day*, for example, self-consciously “wink” at their audiences, letting them know that what they are watching is simply exaggerated artifice. Said differently: “the emperor is naked and the media trumpet forth this fact, yet nobody seems really to mind—that is, people continue to act as if the emperor is not naked ...” (Zizek, 1994:18).

Resistance as symptom is a paradoxical element within capitalism. Peter Sloterdijk (1987/1983) names it “cynical reason.” Cynical reason describes the ideal capitalist subject: resisting on the outside but still believing on the inside. Žižek (1989:29) rephrases Marx’s “false consciousness” of “they do not know it, but they are doing it,” into its contemporary postmodernist reality: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.” Romanticized forms of resistance exhibit this form of “enlightened false consciousness.” Even when one knows the particular hidden interests at work in the various capitalist forms of consumerism, they are not renounced, rather the pleasure is found in enjoying and believing in the subversions that their fantasy formations allow. As Cohen and Taylor (1992/1976) argued some time ago, following Erving Goffman’s lead of “role-distance,” mockery, irony, and skepticism as forms of self-consciousness of the social predicament provide “escape attempts” to protect oneself from the fear that one’s behavior is determined by the rules of the cultural setting. “It did not mean however that they now acted against the institution, it more usually meant that they went along with its edicts with an easier heart, reassured by the distance which they could mentally maintain from its social arrangements” (56). Such behavior, as Žižek remarks, is different from Sloterdijk’s term *kynicism* inspired by Diogenes which represents popular plebian rejections of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm (see Scott, 1985). The forms of popular culture discussed here do not fall into this category which are informed by a fundamental “antagonism.” On the contrary, in an *act* of “romanticized resistance,” as for instance when women of lower socio-economic standing are “liberated” by replacing “masculine money with feminine knowledge” by playing *The New Price is Right* (Fiske, 1990: 137), an ideological fantasy or unconscious illusion structures their social reality, and their desires to fill their lack. In this case, this unconscious fantasy is a liberal patriarchal one: the imaginary metaphorical displacement of working class women and housewives to

be *like* their husbands by having equal economic power; an aspiration which is a denial of the actual existent conditions. Their enjoyment (*jouissance*) masks the trauma of their inability to achieve and occupy this subject position given their present material conditions. As Zizek (1989) argues, "the place of illusion is in the reality of doing itself" (33). Under this formulation, Fiske's 'art of making do' becomes "they know that, in their activity [e.g., playing the quiz show] they are following an illusion, *but still* they are doing it" (*ibid.*, my italic).

"Power, Power Everywhere, but not a Drop of Freedom !"

Fiske (1991) has strongly addressed Baudrillard's characterization of popular culture and television in a postmodern age, arguing that his theory of postmodernism is largely stuck at the level of macro-structure and misses the concrete, contextualized practices where the socially produced images and socially positioned subjects intersect. The play of signs, the refusal of genre categorizations, and the pastiche style of postmodern sensibility belong largely to the middle- and upper-classes who can afford to play such "dress up" games. For the lives of the subordinated the story is quite different. In *Power Plays; Power Works* (1993) Fiske puts into play the figure of a group of "homeless" men watching *Die Hard* within the confines of their shelter's VCR system. One of the men gets up and abruptly turn the video off when Bruce Willis, the film's protagonist eventually begins to side with police authority. Fiske refers to this incident several times throughout his book as a way of demonstrating the conflicts of power that surround any media reception. He argues that this incident demonstrates the agency of resistance despite the fact that these men occupy one of the most powerless and helpless subject positions in society.

Another often cited demonstration of active agency comes from

“critical” (post-Marxist) educational theories of Michael Apple (1979; 1982), Henry Giroux (1981), and Paul Willis (1981). To avoid the charge of Marxist structuralism which characterized their writings in the early ‘80s, they (much like the “late” Foucault of *The History of Sexuality*) turned their attention to “resistance theories” (e.g., Giroux, 1983). This trajectory easily drifted toward questions of “self-identity” which began to play on the academic hit-parade. The “hidden curriculum,” as the unintentional curriculum that emerged “behind the backs” of both students and teacher, was theorized by the complexities and ephemeral nature of Foucault’s knowledge/power dynamics. A particular good *early* example comes from the semiotic theory of television viewing developed by Hodge and Tripp (1986:183-187). They give the example of the Australian soap opera *Prisoner*, whereby school aged children (11-13) identified with its story line set in a women’s prison by perceiving themselves as prisoners of the school system, subject to similar punishments, experiencing the same hierarchy between “them and us,” and identifying their teachers as its wardens. Arguably such an interpretation could well change as they grow older and become parents and teachers themselves. Hodge and Tripp dealt only with the general consensus of the school children as to the soap’s popularity. Gender differences were not explored, nor were those children who disliked the soap questioned for their contradictory readings. Further research, if desired, could identify the economy of other existing power inequalities. Their study, however, made it obvious that such “resistant” meanings attributed to images were inseparable from the material social conditions of those who produced them.

The study by Hodge and Tripp, and Fiske’s suggestive “homeless” example demonstrate how the micro and macro come together in resistance according to Foucault’s theory of power. The inequalities of both the institution of education and the state can be teased out by theorizing everyday life. As Fiske argues, the construction

of “meanings” as part of a set of social and power relations is never static but fluid; it is the site / sight / cite of constant contestation and struggle. But is this, in itself, a limiting proposition? The multiplicity of the axes of social difference, i.e., sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, ableism, age, are continually evolving into new kaleidoscopic arrangements. Power, as Foucault had conceptualized it and Fiske had appropriated it, is forever enigmatic. It does not possess us, but rather it invests and turns us into an element in the play of multiple forces, which seem to have no specific point of origin. In McGowan (1991) summative words: “it [power] is productive; it is only exercised by individuals but never possessed by them [i.e., the individual is constituted by power]; and it is involved in every social relation” (127). In this formulation “the individual exercises power at certain times and in certain places as a functionary of power’s intentions, not her own” (ibid.). Foucault explicitly supports the rationality of power as “characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed (the local cynicism of power)...” (Foucault, 1980: 95). In other words, Foucault’s view of power constitutes the *cynical individual* of postmodernism.¹ Resistance is always theorized against the position of dominant power which, in turn, forms Fiske’s definition of “popular culture.” “[T]here can be no popular dominant culture, for popular culture is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination” (1989:43).

Split Subject of Psychoanalysis versus the Poststructuralist Discursive Subject

Foucault dismissed the “split-subject” of psychoanalysis; i.e., the dualistic vision that pits an inhibiting power against an autonomous and oppressed subject (Copjec, 1990:13-15; Salecl, 1994: 95). Instead, his *positive* concept of power conceives resistance as emerging from the

process that installs the subject (the body) into the social. Law is a norm based on power. There is no power without the potential of refusal or revolt (resistance). Intersubjectivity, what Dews (1987:198) calls “the reciprocity specific to the social domain,” is by and large, diminished in Foucault’s thought. Psychoanalysis in contrast, conceptualizes the *negative* force of power in the sense of rejecting one’s own desires. Power is a force of exclusion or repression. In the theoretical stance of Fiske, fantasy as the seat of ideology drops out. Resistance cannot be theorized along the lines of fantasy formations; rather it becomes a reactive formation against power structures.² The homeless men, for instance, sided with the weak against the strong. “By erasing the end of the movie, when the normal [power relations] reasserted itself, they made sense of the temporary victories of the weak *as if* they were permanent” (Fiske, 1993:129, original italic). The “as if,” which is the seat of ideology, is under theorized. These homeless men exhibit the cynical attitude referred to earlier. There is resistance all right, but the subsequent “freedom” is rather empty since no action to achieve particular purposes has taken place (cf. McGowan, 1991:130). The strength of informing this account with the fantasy structures that support the homeless men’s sense of maintaining their “as if” structures, in short their “reality,” would move the question of “resistance” onto a whole other level. Fiske (1993) does develop the sociological grounds as to why the spectacle of violence is enjoyed by men in a patriarchal capitalist society (Chapter 6). Only by dissolving the fantasy structures that support the viewing of spectacular violence would it become possible for these homeless men to redirect their energies into other, more active forms of resistance, perhaps organizing themselves into a collective. “The subject can ‘enjoy his symptom’ only in so far as its logic escapes him—the measure of the success of its interpretation is precisely its dissolution” (Zizek, 1989:21). In brief, unconscious knowledge is what structures their fantasies.

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The difficulty with theorizing resistance along Foucault's trajectory is that it lends itself to an analysis of micro-politics based on *place* or *location*. Foucault's rhetoric of its complexity leaves an unbridgeable gap between these micro-procedures of power and any formulation of its centralization.³ The "disciplinary procedures" that operate at the level of "micro-power" seem to by-pass ideology altogether since they are not made accountable to some knowable or *unknowable* external power or organizing principal.⁴ Fiske (1993:34, n.9), for example, utilizes the concepts *station* and *locale* as developed by Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Giddens's notion of *locale* to develop his "power plays, power works" thesis. The question, however, now becomes whether the sense of place ("locale," "*habitus*," "station") is still conceptually adequate to theorize power in a postmodern electronic world? Is this not also a romantic holdover? As Best and Kellner (1991:23) point out, Foucault's wide-ranging analyses of power omitted "any discussion of the key contemporary mechanisms of power and social reproduction: media, consumption, fashion, leisure, and semiotics." If Meyrowitz's (1985) thesis of "no sense of place" is to be accepted, the electronic media such as television and the computer have undermined the traditional relationship between physical setting and social situation. Space (cf. Harvey, 1989) and not place, is where such theories concerning power should take place. In *Forget Foucault* (1987/1977) Baudrillard argued that power as Foucault had theorized it was obsolete in an age of simulacra determined by models, codes, information, and the media. Power had become abstract, unlocatable in either the micro or macro structures. In *The Electronic Disturbance* (1994), members of the radical left Critical Art Ensemble conceptualize power as absent and invisible. In an electronic age they argue, it is a cyber-elite—postmodern Scythians—who possess "nomadic power" in their ability to compress time and space at will by occupying the power of the decentralized and deterritorialized cyberspace. Electronic space controls the physical logistics of manufacture. "In most cases sedentary

populations submit to the obscenity of spectacle, and contentedly pay the tribute demanded, in the form of labor material, and profit" (16). In sci-fi dystopias like *Fortress*, *Blade Runner*, and *Total Recall* even the memories and fantasies have been artificially implanted by a corporate cyber-elite colonizing the last vestiges of proletarian private resistance.

How can "sedentary servants," in Critical Art Ensemble terms, cause a "disturbance," under such nomadic domination? What can "paramount" or "dominant" reality mean in a hyperreal world? Where is the Gramscian "power bloc" located if power is so decentralized? What are you resisting when you cannot locate in any adequate way, except perhaps from feelings of melancholia and apocalyptic doom what it is that is oppressing you? (Jay, 1994:35) Such questions raise the possibility that the "multiple," fluid or morphing subjectivity is exactly what late capitalism needs. On one level, it allows a moneyed class to be mobile, fluid, and nomadic like the cyber-elite themselves. "Multiple selves" can enhance the multiple effects of pleasure through even more consumption. Here the mantra of modernist categories of class, color, ethnicity, gender, ages and so on as *critical categories* no longer hold. If they do, they can become counter-productive for profit as in "color" and "green" capitalism. Post-fordist capitalism treats them as designer categories. Any combination of these signs produces a specific target population. As Mercer (1990:426) has argued, this radical pluralism has resulted in "*the challenge of sameness*" where "*no one has a monopoly on oppositional identity.*" (emphasis in original) The sign of being /black/ for instance, is dispersed over a wide discursive field. Patricia Williams (1991), a lawyer from Harvard deconstructs her experience of being barred from Benetton because she was /black/, but here her color was profitably misread and overdetermined by the clerk who refused her entrance. The racial signifier /black/, under other circumstances, identified members of an underclass that did not have the money to

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shop there which she did. Her fluidly blocked—which under other circumstances would have never happened—Williams’s anger was channelled in exposing Benetton’s racist practices.⁵ Clothing companies such as *Cross-colors* and *Mondetta* have already recognized the counter-profitability of maintaining exclusive categories, as has the fashion industry that is profiting from cross-dressing and “designing women” (cf. Gaines and Herzog, 1990). Perpetual cultural deconstruction of meanings and identities as excesses of desire propels consumerist capitalism. In this respect, Madonna’s continued proliferating identities makes her ~~The~~ material girl *par excellence*.

On another level, capitalist marketing targets specific life-styles as so many *fractal spaces* whose descriptive composite is generated by a computerized profile made possible by the “electronic body” each of us already has, registered through bank accounts, consensus questionnaires, social insurance numbers, income tax returns, credit ratings, organizations to which we belong, and so on. Although as agents with “free will,” we do not have to empirically identify with these discursive “market segmented” subject positions prepared for us by capitalist engineers, the very fact that post-fordist designer capitalism reproduces itself through such a broad range of consumerist interests testifies to the success and profit that the pluralization of difference brings. Chaos theory,⁶ which has to deal with indeterminacy and uncertainty through stochastic statistical analysis, is precisely the very ideology necessary to manage transnational capitalism which has to configure (factor in) this plurality of differences. The proliferation of cable and satellite channels which will meet the whims of every possible interest group provides the alibi of liberal pluralism that differences are being served, and that the “end of ideology” and the “end of history” is indeed here despite critical analysis from the Left to claim otherwise. What can “resistance” possibly mean under these circumstances?

In *Seduction* (1990/1979:8), the book that immediately followed *Forget Foucault*, Baudrillard makes the following suggestive remark: “*that seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe*” (original italic). With seduction we enter into the Imaginary and the “reality” of fantasy, what might more adequately be described as the contemporary cyber-space of the mind, where “the sublime object(s) of ideology” (Zizek, 1989) are to be found; where the really “real,” or virtual real is simulated fantasy. *Hegemony and seduction occupy the same territory* (Miller, 1990). As Cora Kaplan (1986:162) adds, “the reader identifies ... *most of all with the process of seduction*” (my emphasis). The interrogation of psychic investments which go into fantasy provide a way to go beyond the “cultural populism” (cf. McGuigan, 1992) of resistance. To theorize how readers/viewers of images and films are caught up in these webs of power requires the supposition of fantasy. However, reading/viewing cannot, in and of itself, be radically individualized and any generalizations that have been attempted by psychoanalysis and textual analysis have led to a stalemate. In other words, taken to their radical extremes, psychoanalysis which “theoretically” deals with an N=1 results in a specificity which cannot be generalizable, while ethnographic approaches which use sociological variables (social class, gender, age and so on) as pre-given categories often end up in reductive generalizations and conflictual findings. As Rodowick, who might be counted as one of the early few psychoanalytic theoreticians questioning any direct correspondence between desire and a sex/gendered subject position, has this to say:

Despite the achievements of psychoanalytic film theory and textual analysis in the past twenty years, I would insist that all claims made about processes of identification in actual spectators, powerful and important as they may be, *are speculative*. In my view the analysis of forms of enunciation, or point of view, in fiction

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films may tell us a great deal about ideological representations of gender differences. However, they can tell us *nothing definitive about the forms of sexual identification, or the potential meanings, produced with respect to actual spectators.*

(Rodowick, 1991:viii, my emphasis).

Walkerdine (1986;1993) is perhaps one of the few researchers who has tried to bridge this psychoanalytic-sociological divide in cultural studies by attempting to provide an explanation for the role which certain fantasies play in specific family situations through a self-reflective and cautious ethnographic approach. Her research suggests that the available fantasy formations, which are consumed, are crucial to understanding resistance as a “romantic” ideological form.⁷

Our sense of self-identification to various socially created subject positions cannot be denied; feral children aside, no one escapes socialization. But we are dispersed subjects, *overdetermined* by some positions and not others. In Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985:111) turn of phrase, “*This field of identities which never manage to be fully fixed, is the field of overdetermination*” (original italic). The paradox of *overdetermination* means that self-identification is “articulated” by a particular element which otherwise remains as a subordinated part to self-identity as a closed “whole” system, i.e., our sense of ourselves as *moi*, as a self-assured ego. As we have seen with the example of /black/, as a “free floating signifier” (Laclau, 1977) in particular context like the Benetton store, the identity of Patricia Williams was overdetermined by it, whereas in another context her position as a Harvard lawyer has more determining power. As dispersed subjects each of us is subjected to a variety of discourses differently. The riddle of postmodern political

subjectivity comes to mind: What do a trade unionist, a racist, a Christian, a wife-beater, and a consumer have in common? Answer: *They all can be the same person!* (Ross, 1990). Fiske makes no mention who it was amongst the homeless who turned off the film. Did he represent the wishes of *all* these men? Did he hold a place of privilege because he was a leader? Did that leadership come about because of his rhetorical power? or due to his physical strength? Was their fantasy of resistance merely a cynical repetition?

Can it be that Baudrillard's "ecstasy of communication" is closer to describing the way ideology works if contradictory readings are equally accounted for? After all, the Hodge and Tripp example confirms the structural similarities of power in all modernist institutions: schools, asylums, police departments, corporations, hospitals, religious organizations which continue to function despite their inherent contradictions. *Accommodation* and *complicity* is as much of this reproductive process as is resistance. These are all examples of "total institutions" (Goffman, 1961) which have built in structural forms of power along with built-in safety features for their criticism. They are like Bakhtin's "loophole" texts, anticipating the objections and faults to their very structure. The difficulty of attributing specificity to the media/reader couplet prompts me to ask whether the continued vogue in popular cultural studies isn't inadvertently supporting a fantasy structure of resistance which is the very mechanism that allows patriarchal hegemony to reproduce itself through consumerist seductions? As Todd Gitlin (1991:336) once asked, "does it engage in the politics in the strictest sense ... or does it simply make the most of consumption?"

Questioning Jouissance: "Enjoy Your Symptom More than Yourself"⁸

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Gitlin's question is a difficult one to answer. In one sense, subversive resistance provides great pleasure as developed in the well-known and (by now) well-worn thesis by de Certeau (1984), where the subordinate's uses of "tact" prevail over the dominant's "strategies" of containment. The same may be said of Fiske (1987; 1989 a, b; 1990; 1992) and Stam (1989) in their interpretations of television series, game shows and films respectively with their appropriation of Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque opposition. Stam (1989:197) has eloquently analyzed Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* as brilliantly displaying Bakhtin's notion of a "loophole text," a filmic text which anticipates, in advance, all possible criticisms of itself and its director. Yet, despite this, the journalistic reviews charged the film with the very faults that it had already charged itself. For me, this indicates that the effects of the text far exceed the inner workings of its form, no matter how clever that form may prove to be. Stam enthusiastically embraces the resistant practices of the carnival, and yet I would temper his enthusiastic assessment of the subversive potential of the "cinematic" carnival with Umberto Eco's more sobering assessment of the carnival as "an authorized transgression deeply dependent on a law that it only apparently violates ... [T]he powerful have always used the *circenses* to muffle popular rebellion, just as the contemporary mass media, instruments of social control, operate a 'continuous carnivalization of life' " (in Stam, 1989:91).

In cultural studies, perhaps Janice Radway (1984) has been given the most quotable credit in recent years for introducing this resistant view in her ethnographic study of women reading romance novels who identify with a particular feisty heroine who fights against her domineering male antagonist. Fiske's encapsulation of resistance as the "art of making do" with what's at hand, and the political use of pleasure by women in popular culture, especially in women's genres of soap operas, romance novels, melodramas, the fashion

industry, shopping for pleasure, and popular music require cautious assessment. Their locations, by and large, are shaped by institutions already “structured in dominance” (Hall, 1980: 134). This is an extremely difficult issue to think through since all texts are constituted by aspects of utopia and ideology (Jameson, 1981). Fiske constantly reminds his readers that the potentiality of disruption, subversion and liberalization always exists in the bodily excesses of *jouissance*; i.e., in carnivalesque pleasures where bodies escape being managed and disciplined by the social order. Despite such assurances, I believe it is still a highly contentious proposition to underestimate the license given by the prevailing social order to allow such forms to exist as a “strategy of containment” (Eagleton, 1981). Without such allowances the discursive rhetoric of “democracy” as the best that can be currently achieved could never be maintained. *Jouissance* is itself, under-theorized and a problematic concept. French feminists (Cixous, Irigaray, Clément, Montrelay) wrestled the term away from Lacan precisely because Lacan admitted that *feminine jouissance* in particular existed outside the containment of the Symbolic Order. As the Symbolic Order’s limit, they found the excesses of *jouissance* as a liberation from phallocentrism. Writing around the same time, Barthes’ (1975) appropriation of the Lacanian term as developed in his “pleasure of the text” thesis, gave him leverage to break with orthodox notions of ideology critique. This fit neatly into Fiske’s further reappropriation of the term into popular culture as a form of resistant bodily evasion.⁹ However, because Fiske rejects the “split-subject” of psychoanalysis, theorizing Foucault’s discursive subject instead, his interpretation of *jouissance* fails to recognize that resistance coupled to *jouissance* as he interprets this term is the seat of ideology *par excellent*. From a Lacanian psychoanalytic view enjoyment, as *jouis-sense* (“enjoy-meant,” or “enjoyment-in-meaning”), means a mis-recognition of the very “substance,” or “kernel” of one’s desire which remains hidden and unknowable. In contrast, Fiske’s interpretation of *jouissance* is comparable to *plaisir* in Roland Barthes

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sense—mundane pleasure that confirms one sense of identity. Under these circumstances, resistance as pleasurable meaning means avoiding the Real (unconscious) of one's desire. Access to such knowledge would mean paying for it with a loss of enjoyment. The stupidity of enjoyment as "resistance" is only possible on the basis of ignorance, or unconscious non-knowledge.¹⁰ Facing the "kernel" of one's desire is a terrifying and fearful event, one where "freedom" means breaking the symbolic reality in which one is embedded. Here *jouissance* takes on quite a different meaning. In Žizek's qualifying phrase:

What should be pointed out here is that enjoyment (*jouissance*, *Genuss*) is not to be equated with pleasure (Lust): enjoyment if precisely 'Lust im Unlust'; it designates the paradoxical situation procured by a painful encounter with a Thing that perturbs the equilibrium of the 'pleasure principle.' In other words, enjoyment is located 'beyond the pleasure principle.'

(Žizek, 1993:280, n.6)

Fiske's employment of Barthe's term *jouissance* throughout his writings is more closely related to the pleasure principle of *plaisir*, and to the more familiar experience of *catharsis* than it is to the psychoanalytic realm of *jouissance* as defined above. I believe a case can be made for equating "resistance" as a postmodern form of catharsis. Catharsis has the same elements of *jouissance* as Fiske uses the term, namely as a "loss of subjectivity" that seems to escape the control of culture. Doesn't the cathartic purging of fear and pity, which characterizes the classical sense of tragedy, fall under *plaisir*, as pleasure contained within the

social order? In the famous Lacanian (1982) seminar on the “ecstasy of St Teresa,” is her *jouissance* to be read as still under the recuperation of the Church’s power (after all, she is in ecstasy *with* God)? Or, is she now experiencing the delight of her own body, orgasmically and metaphorically represented by Irigaray’s (1985) “two lips”? How radical has her escape from the Church Father’s been? (see Ash, 1990)

Linda Williams (1991) has further complicated the issue of *jouissance*. Again, her discussion presents the possibility of naming resistance as a cathartic experience of containment. She has cleverly pointed to other filmic bodies in excess—in *ecstasy*—as they relate to specific film genres which have *low cultural status*, but a high repetition of consumption: overwhelming pathos in the “weepy” melodramas, the orgasmic body in pornographic films, and the violence and terror of the body in horror films. All three forms, which relate to sex, violence, and strong emotion, would fit Fiske’s “Barthian” definition of *jouissance* as a primal orgasmic experience of fantasy (see note 12). “Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm —of the body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness” (Williams: 1991:4). These primary embodiments of pleasure, fear, and pain, which range from the masculine pole (pornography) to the feminine pole (melodrama), with horror in between for adolescents “careening wildly between the two masculine and feminine poles,” (ibid.) are played out over the bodies of women in extremely complex ways. If Williams is to be followed, pleasure becomes an extremely complicated issue as the cinematic gaze bounces all over the sex/gender landscape with no easy way of separating the boundaries between pleasure, fear and pain. Often pleasure turns to pain and visa versa as in the practices of sadomasochism. For a teenager, fear can be a pleasurable experience while watching a horror film (Glover, 1992).

We have now reached a point where sex/gender confusions

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abound in terms of subject positions which any one text offers (Adams, 1991; Rodowick, 1991). Evasive pleasures may be found in the new genres of pornography developed specifically for women, heterosexual couples, bisexuals, gays, lesbians, as well as for the transgendered community. The recent phenomenon of male “weepies,” melodramas like *Dad* have appeared. Is it possible to interpret these bodies in excess which are allowed to let off “bodily steam,” so to speak; to ejaculate, shudder, spill blood, sob and cry as a way to avoid the “normal” and banal disciplined existence of mundane life as a containment strategy by dominant hegemony? We are back full circle to the question of catharsis. The difference being that such societal catharsis is not classically defined as tragic—purging fear and pity—but its postmodern varieties which purge yet other anxieties of the age: the insecurities related to sex/gender and power. Isn’t the border between Barthes’ weak dichotomization between *plaisir/jouissance* represented by the very institutionalized forms of cathartic release: Greek tragedy, Roman gladiatorial fights, Medieval public executions, and today’s postmodernist spectatorial forms of audience participation, like telethons, live aid, sports spectacles and rock concerts? With the loss of authority and faith and trust in the Symbolic Order, the question of perverted *jouissance* once more emerges on the landscape. What role does hysterical and obsessional behavior as it relates to the Law have for young people today? How can we identify desire which is potentially transformative from the drive impulses that are more destructive? Euphoric “hooliganism” that young men experience during soccer matches, or the “slam” dances of skinhead culture, or the drug-induced euphoria of rave dances, strictly speaking as resistant displays of *jouissance* surely are not to be interpreted positively. Rather, they are symptomatic of the psychic pain that young people suffer today, where “skin games” (piercing, tattooing and cutting) have radical ways to “feel” (Jagodzinski, in press).

There is no radical psychology of desire incorporated into cultural studies, at least to my knowledge, which would help *theorize* how the identification in fantasy with a heroine by a “housewife” who regularly consumes specific novels Janice Radway describes, leads to *actually changes in the real conditions of her existence*. Her experience of *jouissance* (as *plaisir*), and the cathartic release that comes with it may simply be one of emotional release, a way to sustain a hope that her future will change. These are accommodations to the structure, rather than challenges to its limits. It may well be that this form of empowerment provides her with more space by challenging some of her husband’s patriarchal practices. But should such resistance be interpreted as liberating? Concessions to some of her demands on her husband’s part may well be made in order to maintain a relationship of subordination. Put pejoratively speaking, if the “natives” are restless, then yield to some of their demands; give them some “rope” so that their “work” can go on. Isn’t this precisely what this melodrama does? As Schröder concludes in his discussion of *Dynasty*:

In other words, TV melodrama establishes an aesthetic contract with its viewers. It offers them an opportunity to explore individual and social tensions and to face behaviour which is shocking or threatening to prevailing moral codes. Furthermore, it promises that the experience will end on a note of reassurance and moral acceptability, and be stranded with frequent implausibilities so that viewers can suspend involvement and withdraw to a position of superior distance, should they begin to feel uncomfortably affected by the fictional distance of agony and immorality

(Schröder:1988:76).

After the viewing of each episode of *Dynasty*, after the reading of every romance novel, the social structure remain essentially the same. It would

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have to take a lot more than just reading such romance novels for a woman to get away from the reality of an abusive relationship.

In the mid-90s, Ien Ang (1996:91) reaffirmed that Sue Ellen character in *Dallas* was by far the most popular character with whom women identify with. As a heroine, she represents the very embodiment of the melodramatic imagination—masochistic and powerless—a surrender to forces outside the subject. As a symbolic realization of a popular feminine subject position this alone should continue to send out the message that feminist struggles are far from over. Yet, there is persistence that “reading the romance” is a resistant form that should continue to be honored. Ien Ang (1996:107), when reviewing Radway’s pioneering work, claims that the psychic investment in the romance fantasy should be taken seriously. “And it [the romantic fantasy] is this enduring emotional quest that, I would suggest, should be taken seriously as a psychical strategy by which women *empower* themselves in everyday life, leaving apart what its ideological consequences in social reality are” (emphasis mine). Ang is uncertain how feminism should respond to this, but she has no difficulty in chastising Radway for her rationalist *feminist* proposal to overcome the ideological function of the pleasure these women experience. Recognizing the psychic investment in the romantic fantasy is not the problem here. Rather it is the very pleasure these women experience as a form of “resistance” and “empowerment” which is precisely how they avoid the Real of their desire. They enjoy their “symptom” (i.e., being powerless and caught in a masochistic relationship) more than themselves. The “repetition” of the romance fantasy is sustained by maintaining that the external circumstances they find themselves in cannot be changed—the psychic investment to make such a change is not worth it. It would cause too much “suffering.” Children and financial circumstances seem to make it “impossible.” Rather than facing the “freedom” that comes with *jouissance* in the psychoanalytic sense, they absolve themselves

of agency and displace it on external circumstances. As a further complication, if these women feel guilty and morally responsible for the state of their marriage, then there is no need to examine the ideological, political, and economic conditions of patriarchy that sustains their unhappiness, depression, and frustration. Reading the romance is a way of making the present oppressive circumstances tolerable. Such pleasures (e.g., like Sue Ellen's occasional extra-marital affairs) often prevent them from falling into a completely cynical position which comes by completely blaming external circumstances. Instead they remain "good" housewives rather than falling into total rudeness and hate toward their husbands. Such a form of resistant agency acts like a "crutch," keeping hope alive that circumstances may change. In Derrida's (1987) sense, where the frame itself is part of the framed content, the romance fantasy is the frame that frames these women into patriarchal ideology. It is the supplement which must be continually consumed in order to keep the picture tolerable. And that picture calls for an immobility regardless how strong the heroines are.

Looking now into the new millennium, a decade later, have things significantly changed since the mid-90s? Can we say that postfeminism of the liberal variety, exemplified by such television series as *Sex in the City* and the reality shows that have begun to pervert marriage (Joe Millionaire, The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, Meet My Parents, Married By America) have significantly altered the complaint? Admittedly, liberal feminism has introduced a "revolution" in the romance novel. It may be said that today's postmodern heroine has been transformed into playing a "stronger role." She has been given the strength of character to challenge her male antagonists. The same may be said for heterosexual and lesbian detective novels. No one would deny that the reading of such romance and detective novels may *potentially* contribute to a housewife's eventual departure from an intolerable situation, or that lesbian detective stories don't provide

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positive fantasy models for women who are questioning their own sex preferences, or searching for confirmation regarding their own life styles. But, an answer which speaks to the reasons for change confined to the influence of media *alone* is undecidable. Much like *there is no causal link between watching video violence and committing real acts of brutality*, a finding which is often repeated by media researchers even in controversial areas like pornography and televised and filmic violence, but continuously rejected by the pro-censorship moral guardians of society, the benefits of romance novels to women have been over-exaggerated (Clancy, 1992; Purdie, 1992). Surely the social relations and the material conditions of the support communities which circle and contextualize the reading of romance are much more influential in determining the direction women's lives will take?

It is often forgotten that such liberalist melodramatic romance forms have contributed to the gains of very small strata of white middle-class women. Issues of race, ethnicity, ableism complicate this situation enormously. On another register, the reception of soaps by working class women and by women in "third world," as well as what were once one-party state communist countries, namely Russia, find American soap operas fanciful projections of life styles they could never hope to achieve. They read them as being "unrealistic," confirming more what they don't have than what they hope to have (Brown, 1990 a,b). Soviet capitalism fashioned a decade later has been conditioned and shaped by these very unattainable fantasies. Joyrich (1988; 1990:162-63) is especially perceptive in her account of showing how the tropes of female proximity, fluidity, and "nearness" which are codes of "feminine textuality," offered as subversive alternatives to masculine models of identity, support the psychology of the perfect consumer. And, as forcefully argued by Rosemary Hennessy (1993, 2000), this emergent "new woman" is the exemplar for the logic of late capitalism.

Concluding Thoughts

The dangers of resistant pleasure have been well voiced throughout cultural studies. It has been my thesis that such resistant pleasures enable capitalist consumerist ideology to reproduce itself. Cynical reason is one resistant response; the resistant repetition involved in the consumption of romance is yet another. Cathartic release through the media experiences of violence, melodrama, and erotica (pornography) purge the body of its pent up desires to change social conditions. In order for capitalist patriarchy to maintain its hegemony, seduction through fantasy formations must provide a broad enough range of subject positions to psychically satisfy and preserve the existent class, race, sex / gender, ethnic, age dynamics. The relation between fantasy and lived experience becomes the key site / sight / cite for counter-hegemonic intervention. For groups like ACT UP the fantasy formations of AIDS created by the media, the state, and the medical profession have been exposed (e.g., Crimp, 1988), consequently their resistance have been “antagonistic” rather than the complacent kind developed in this essay. For a more active form of resistance it seems that a return to a neo-Gramscian agenda of “popular education” is in order (Hall, 1996). Ang (1996) worries how feminist cultural workers might avoid the “moral high ground” when confronting the fantasies of their non-feminist informants. It seems to me that a visual cultural studies education that steers, or oscillates between the fantasy subject positions offered by any given text and an investigation of a personal psychic investment and commitment to specific fantasies by informants-students-co-researchers *and* researcher or research team would be one possible way to level the moral ground (jagodzynski, 2002). Leaving ethnographic investigations at the level of discourse theories alone enables an abdication of social and ethical responsibility by all those concerned. If the context and the “already ready” historical discourses

determine the subject then the subject must continually reflect the guilt or makes excuses why the situation cannot be changed. Only by recognizing the impossible gap which exists between the enunciated subject and the subject of enunciation can responsibility be taken for the fantasies we identify with. Perhaps then, certain fantasies which prevent “freedom” towards more democratic social relations can be rejected and replaced by more enabling fantasies. But this may not be a pleasurable matter.

Notes

1. McGowan (1991: 131-134) provides three succinct criticisms of Foucault’s theory of power which could be characteristic of cynical reason. First, freedom conceptualized as resistance is empty. ‘All power in Foucault is equal, just as all resistance is approved’ (132). Foucault never qualifies the resistance by questioning its goals. Second, freedom is exercised in resistance rather than in power. In other words, he has not an articulated sense of the positive sense of power—especially its capacity to achieve *collective* goals. Power has a ‘distinctly negative charge’ (133) which bifurcates his theory into power as conservative action against resistance as transgressive action. And third is Foucault’s difficulty identifying when ‘power is not an evil’ (134).

2. Fiske (1987) dismissed the usefulness of psychoanalysis in his study of television, confining its possibilities to film alone. The Foucaultian decentered subject of discourse replaced the ‘split-subject’ of psychoanalysis in his approach to cultural studies. John Rajchman (1991) has usefully elaborated on the different understanding of the ‘self’ between Lacan and Foucault by examining their respective ethical stances.

3. In contrast to Althusser (1971), for instance, who conceives these

micro-politics of power as part of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA's). The individual is 'already ready' interpellated by the ideological big Other (the state).

4. Here I follow Copjec's (1994) critique of Foucault. The 'unknowable' nature of the organizing principal of society is crucial here. Society as an 'open system' can still be usefully theorized by speculating on the cause which is occluded from the system but which nevertheless establishes the system in the first place. This first principal functions as a phantasy structure of ideology. According to Copjec, Foucault's rejection of psychoanalysis places him as a 'historicist' who grounds being at the level of appearance and avoids any questions of desire (as fantasy) which is registered negatively (as absent) in language. '[W]e are calling historicist the reduction of society to its indwelling newtwork of relations of power and knowledge' (6).

5. Benetton's racist advertising has been well exposed and documented. See Giroux (1994); Back and Quaade (1994); Thévenaz (1995).

6. Chaos theory is a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being. It incorporates the erratic and the irregular, discontinuity and disorder, oscillation and wild swirls into a science that searches for new laws that encompass these patterns so as to make a strong claim about the universal behavior of hypercomplex systems. Chaos means a special complex kind of prediction and probability assessment. Irregularity can now be analyzed now that powerful computers available (see Gleick, 1987).

7. Her 1986 study examined the pleasures of violence by working

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class men. The fantasy provided a 'romantic' hope that they could get ahead in the world through physical struggle 'with their hands' alone. It becomes a specific masculine response to overcome humiliation and cowardice. In her 1993 study with June Melody she identifies how the fantasy formation of the 'orphan child' in the film *Annie* enables six year old Eliana to cope living with her dysfunctional family. Pleasure is found in Annie's escape from her drunken mother and finding true happiness with a wealthy man.

8. See Zizek (1991).

9. Fiske's (1987:50-51) definition of *jouissance* as developed by Barthes goes as follows: '*Jouissance*, translated variously as bliss, ecstasy, or orgasm, is the pleasure of the body that occurs at the moment of the breakdown of culture into nature. It is a loss of self and of the subjectivity that controls and governs the self—the self is socially constructed and therefore controlled, it is the site of subjectivity and therefore the site of ideological production and reproduction. The loss of self is, therefore, the evasion of ideology. ... The orgasmic pleasure of the body out of control—the loss of self—is a pleasure of evasion, of escape from the self-control/ social control ... an escape from meaning'

10. See Zizek (1989:68-69) for *jouissance* as theorized more as a question of *plaisir*. Fiske (1987:229-230) admits that 'the distinction between *plaisir* and *jouissance* is often difficult to make in practice....'

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